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Science Committee Reviews Columbia Accident Investigation Board Report

Washington D.C.- The House Science Committee today held the first of a series of hearings on the Columbia Accident Investigation Board (CAIB) report, NASA's Shuttle program and the future of human space flight.

The premier witness at the hearing, retired Navy Admiral Harold Gehman, headed the CAIB.

"Admiral Gehman and the entire investigation board is to be commended for their thorough and straightforward report on the current status of NASA and the causes of the tragic loss of Shuttle Columbia and its crew," said Congressman Todd Akin (R-MO), a member of the House Science Committee. "NASA is a crown jewel of our federal government, and is a source of great pride and technological achievement and growth for this nation. It is though necessary for NASA and Congress to take to heart the sobering findings of CAIB."

Key findings in the report include the following conclusions:

- The physical cause of the Shuttle accident was due to a large piece of insulating foam falling from the bipod ramp that connects the external fuel tank to the orbiter soon after take-off;
- Organizational and "cultural" failings at NASA are just as responsible for the disaster;
- Recommendations for changes required before returning to flight of the shuttle, among which are physical changes to the shuttle, improved ability to take pictures during launch and flight and improved resistance to impact by the heat resistant tiles; and
- A recommendation for longer-term change of NASA's organizational structure is needed to improve flight safety.

"As these hearings proceed and as we work to make fundamental decisions on the future of manned space flight, it is necessary that Congress receives solid estimates from NASA as to the costs of implementing the proposed reforms," said Akin. "It is also incumbent on Congress to make sure NASA has the necessary funds to carry out in a safe and professional fashion the mission that it is given."